Ethics or Êthos? How to Dwell, Where to Dwell

By Nathalie Roudil

Ethics

We've never spoken more about ethics. And yet, as the word circulates, it seems to hollow out, to lose its substance. Like self-awareness or values—those we claim or those that claim us—ethics fluctuates, shifting with time, culture, and sensibility. It enters contemporary debates, finds its way into the human sciences, the medical field, bioethical controversies, and end-of-life questions. It is embedded in treatises of moral philosophy as much as in corporate codes of conduct. But by occupying every terrain, ethics begins to take on a spectral form: omnipresent, elusive, often debased. The more we try to apply it, the more it slips away. Behind the discourse, it becomes a slogan, a posture, a polished surface. Beneath rhetorical weight, its true density evaporates. A refuge-word or a mask-word, the ideal it carries disintegrates into a proliferation of norms without a world.

If ethics (ethikē, via Latin ethica) claims to be normative, rational, prescriptive—anchored in systems whether deontological, utilitarian, or Aristotelian in virtue—then êthos (ἦθος) in ancient Greek refers to the way of inhabiting, the sojourn, the dwelling. It is a mode of *being-in-the-world*, a climate, a tone, a style—not a rule, but a resonance. In Heraclitus: êthos anthrōpō daimōn—"man's êthos is his daimon"—not a moral choice, but an ontological inscription.

Êthos

I therefore prefer to approach ethics through the term êthos—akin, but more archaic, more subterranean. Êthos is pre-discursive, embodied, atmospheric. It cannot be deduced: it is perceived, intuited, shared—or even betrayed. It engages gestures, habits, affects. It speaks less through concepts than through intensities. Where ethics prescribes, êthos exposes: it is the very site of exposure, of disposition, of cohabitation.

From êthos, then, I wish to sketch a reflection on human dwelling—not as mastery of the world, but as fragile, situated, traversed inhabitation. Not a morality to implement, but a way of being-in-the-world, in resonance with what speculative realism teaches us.

Speculative Realism and Dwelling

Speculative realism is a contemporary philosophical movement seeking to overcome the anthropocentrism still pervasive in modern philosophy. It opposes traditions that place humans at the centre or as the measure of all things—especially those that claim we can only know the world through our perception or cognition. Speculative realism asserts that the world exists independently of us, that objects, entities, phenomena—living, inert, technical,

or atmospheric—possess their own irreducible reality, beyond our mental frameworks. It is not a return to naïve realism, but an invention of speculative thought—creative and non-anthropocentric—which accepts that the real withdraws even as it acts. It means thinking from the retreat of things, from their plural existences, their silent relations, their autonomy.

To dwell is not to possess a territory, but to be affected by it; not to shape space to our norms, but to be shaped by its resistances, silences, non-human rhythms. To dwell is not to impose order, but to attune oneself to a plurality of presences—objects, materials, climates, images, ghosts.

From this perspective, êthos becomes atmospheric. It does not impose by force, but infuses, unfolds in sensitive intensities. No longer the law of the subject, but the tonality of a world where the subject falters. A world in which everything —house, wind, shadow—has its own irreducible way of being.

To think êthos speculatively is to accept dwelling in a world that eludes us. It is to cultivate fragile attention, listening, an art of sojourn in a real that cannot be owned. It is to recognise that the house itself, far from being a domesticated extension of ourselves, is a presence, an object, a threshold.

Dwelling becomes an experience of speculative coexistence. Not because all is mysterious or distant, but because all, in the end, resists capture. The world is not given to us like an open book. It signals to us, without ever revealing itself fully. And it is in this interval—in this chiaroscuro of being—that êthos emerges as a way of living with the world's strangeness, not to dispel it, but to attune to it.

From Êthos to a Plurality of Êthē: The World as an Open Dwelling

Very concretely, ways of living and dwelling are not universal. There exists a plurality of êthē: a diversity of ways of *being-in-the-world*, of inhabiting it, of feeling it, shaping it, or vanishing into it. Every human being, group, or culture dwells in a world that is their own. Each has its own êthos—a singular way of relating to earth, sky, objects, and others.

One might speak here of a plurality of sensitive installations, of styles of existence, of ways of being at home or being estranged from oneself. Strange kinship, familiar estrangement: walls define our own peculiar way of inhabiting.

Are we capable of dwelling in a common world beyond our walls, unless we use "wall-ears"— clandestine listening devices to capture what is not ours? And what of place itself?

Sometimes, it takes only a few steps, sometimes thousands of kilometres, to separate two visions of the world. Each culture governs, senses, interprets, and defends its own world. It is difficult—perhaps illusory—to gather all these êthē into a unified ethical framework.

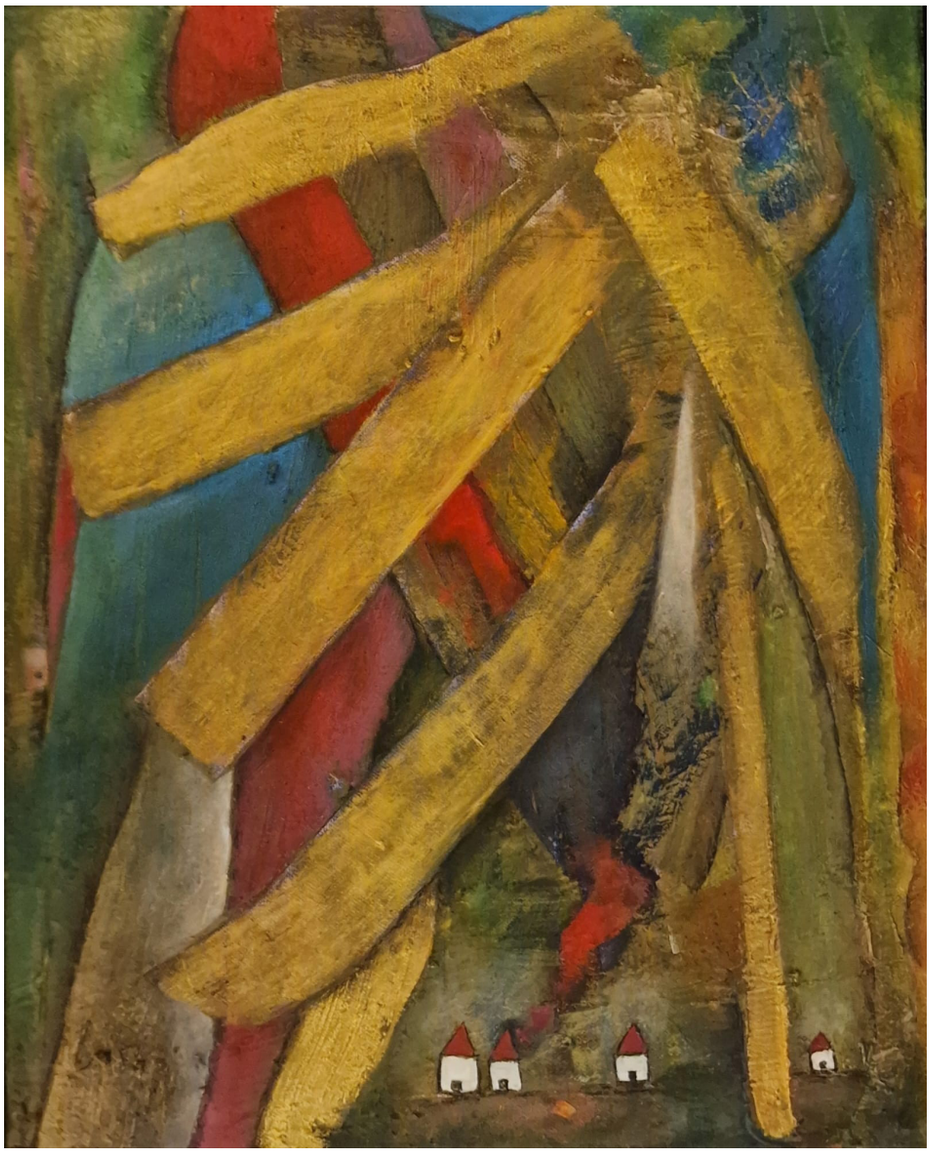
From this tension arise countless human conflicts. Hegel's dialectic of master and slave may now be no more than a philosophical fantasy: masters no longer free slaves, nor elevate themselves. They subjugate, exploit, destroy—caught in the blind mechanics of capital, production, extraction. The world is no longer a shared dwelling, but a field of ruins inhabited by orphaned powers.

Yesterday as today, the human ethic we seek—universal, benevolent, rational—trembles. And êthos, that fragile site of the world as presence, is sullied with filth, pollution, denial. Earth is no longer habitat: it is an outside that precedes us, exceeds us, will outlast us.

In this light, ethics would no longer consist in imposing a universal truth or model of life, but in recognising the plurality of human and non-human objects—not merely to "coexist ecologically," but to unfold among them: wild, fragile, enigmatic, open to contingency, curious about forces that sustain one another without ever fully recognising each other.

Thus, ethics would no longer be a rule to follow, but a disposition toward opaque cohabitation. A way of living in and with distance—not to bridge it, but to respect it.

"Societas," in this sense, is no longer a human association alone, but a fabric of influences, affects, and co-affectations between humans, non-humans, animals, plants, stones, technological objects, climates, viruses, artificial intelligences. The socius is no longer just a



companion: it can be a volcano, a fungus, a drop of oil, a radioactive cloud, a painting, a dream.

The Call of Responsibility? From the Anthropocene to the Necrocene

It was once thought that naming the human as a geological force would spark ecological awareness. The human became the central organiser of the Earth—namer, agent, decider, even ruler of endings. Thus, the Anthropocene narrative often becomes a tragic staging in which the human, having caused everything, is also solely responsible for fixing everything. This injunction to responsibility—even well-intentioned—reinstates the hegemony of the subject: it is still from him that salvation or collapse depends.

Could a speculative realist ethics open a wholly different space: one of responsibility without mastery, without redemptive projection or centralised guilt? A responsibility no longer based on the sovereign subject, but awakened in the attunement to what exceeds and decentres us?

To Dwell in the Irreconcilable

The call would no longer arise from a moral imperative, but from the collapse of our position. The point would no longer be to "save the Earth" as an object external to us, but to attune ourselves to its elusive, multiple dimension—to its inaccessible objects, to its hyperobjects. Ethics would no longer respond to a debt, but would become a resonance, a tremor in the shadow of things.

To dwell in the irreconcilable, in the tension between known and unknown, between presence and absence, between the human and what is not human.

This requires a radical ethical gesture: not to close the place, the êthos. An unconditional hospitality, which neither begins nor ends with us. A manner without guarantees—but inhabited. This is the êthos of ethics.

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